

STONEHENGE TO STONEWALL

Or Gay History In A Nutshell

What A Guy Won't Do For Pizza!

BY CHARLES EDMOND

We were about 18 gay Vermonters and New Hampshireites gathered in one guy's living room to eat pizza and watch the film "Out of the Past". As an introduction to the film, I took the opportunity to expound on our collective history. I might add that I often tend to do this and with very little provocation...especially when promised free pizza!

After a while, one of the guys seated on the floor waved his piece of pizza at me and asked why I wasn't writing a regular history column in our statewide newspaper. I didn't have a good answer for him so I thanked him for his question and kept rolling right along.

But while we were watching the film (VERY well made, by the way) I kept asking myself, why not? After all, I have loads of stuff on my computer, I have been teaching and reading and writing about gay and lesbian history for years now and I LOVE sharing what I have learned.

So I resolved to dash off an email offer to the editor of OITM as soon as I got home. Barb appeared to be ecstatic at the offer, accepted with glee and proceeded to give me half a day to meet the December issue deadline (talk about pressure!) and here I am.

My plan, at this point, is to work on background a bit, say a couple of issues, and then start at the beginning with same-sex activity among the Neanderthals. (What we know of it that is...which isn't a whole lot I admit!)

An Outline

In my classes and in workshops, I follow the course of Western Civilization as it is usually defined and present a very brief outline of homosexuality from the beginnings of humankind up to the America of the 20th century. This time-line approach to the discussion of homosexuality through the ages has been forged in my brain through my many, many years of teaching Foundations of Western Civilization both at the high school and the college level.

So that is the form this series will take and it is the form my college "Gay History" course takes. The actual title of the course, which I teach for the Community College of Vermont in Springfield and White River Junction, is "Hidden History: Homosexuality in Western Civilization".

I begin with the ancient civilizations in the "Cradle of Civilization", tackle ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, weave through Judaism and Christianity, follow Europe through the Reformation and the exploration of the New World, and examine Native American cultures up through modern US history. I also add a section on Germany because of its general importance to the concept of gay civil rights.

I must confess that I am often met with a puzzled look when I mention that I teach such a course. The general perception of the average American seems to be that "gay liberation" is a relatively new phenomenon dating back to the hippies and the love-ins of the 60s. They seem to believe that lesbians and gay men are a radical American minority (out to destroy society as we know it!) Of course, this perception could not be further from the truth and the course I teach is not called "Hidden History for nothing!"

Stonehenge To Stonewall

I'm afraid I can't claim to have thought up this charmingly alliterative title which gives you in three words the concept that we have ALWAYS been around! However, let's imagine that we can look at the sweep of human history, worldwide, from the time of Stonehenge (a prehistoric ritual monument in England) to the time of Stonewall (the Stonewall riots in 1969 are the commonly accepted beginning of the modern gay rights movement).

There is evidence, often excitingly abundant, of same-sex activity in every culture, every country and every time period! Throughout history men and women have had the desire to have sex with others of the same sex. This is no mystery to us, of course, but it has sometimes proved a real puzzle to people firmly lodged at the other end of the Kinsey scale!

Of course, how each society and culture has regarded same-sex activity has varied through the ages from open acceptance and even encouragement to total rejection. Same-sex activity often has, or had, a place within the context of passage from puberty to adulthood. Sometimes it has, or had, a ritual, mystical or spiritual aspect. Still other cultures, including parts of our own today, sanctioned same-sex activity in situations in which the opposite sex was not available.

In some instances, for example in many Native American

tribes, among the Greeks and Romans during their golden centuries, among the Samurai of Japan, and in some tribes in Africa, same-sex activity was a pervasive, acceptable and inte-

gral part of the culture. (Oh to have lived in such times and places!) In still other instances, as among the Puritans, in Nazi Germany, among the ancient Hebrews and in the culture of the Spanish Conquistadors, such activity was legislated against and severely punished when discovered. (A lot like it is today if you happen to live in Utah.) The point is that EVERY society has had to deal with the occurrence of same-sex activity among its citizens.

The general perception of the average American seems to be that "gay liberation" is a relatively new phenomenon dating back to the hippies and the love-ins of the 60s.

Unfortunately, my CCV course is a survey course. In my workshops I never have enough time to even outline the path les-

bians and gays have taken through Western Civilization. I have to omit the examination of homosexuality in many other varied and fascinating cultures from the ancient East, to the "cult of the cut sleeve" in ancient Japan, to societal homosexuality in Polynesia, to homosexuality in ancient Africa and in modern South Africa, among the Esquimo and under Islam through the ages. To study all of these would take a lifetime.

So I will be brief. I will write about gay and lesbian history following my usual path and try to educate, entertain and inform as I do so. Actually, a better word here is "empower". It came up several times in our discussion the other night and in a word it explains why I am driven to talk to lesbians and gay men about our history whenever I can. (OK, OK, it was really the promise of

free pizza!)

Next month: was Alexander the Great REALLY gay?

Homework

For more information I would suggest: Neil Miller's *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. NAL Books, New York, NY. 1989. The paperback edition: *Out of the Past*, Vintage Books, New York 1995 ISBN 0-679-74988-8. This book has excellent chapters on a wide variety of historical cultures, people and movements and is especially interesting because it outlines and discusses cultures outside the usual sweep of Western Civilization. ▼

Charlie Emond is a Vermont Adult Learning teacher in Springfield; teaching courses in literacy, GED subjects and nutrition. He has master's degrees from both Dartmouth College and Keene State College. For the past several years he has taught Dimensions of Learning, Spanish, Foundations of Western Civilization, Hidden History: Homosexuality in Western Civilization and Colonial America and the American Revolution for the Community College of Vermont in Springfield and White River Junction.

New Dates and Times for OITM Distribution:

➔ Last Tuesday of the month, beginning 12/29, 4:00 to 9:00ish

Come when you can, leave when you have to.

We Need Brains and Brawn.

Meet at the Daily Bread on Bridge Street in Richmond.



Help us get YOUR paper to you faster.